DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 193 CG 024 260

AUTHOR Jernigan, Nathan Scott; Heritage, Jeannette
TITLE Confusion in Decision-Making Roles, Argument Level, and Self-Esteem within Marital Dyads.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Southwestern Psychological Association (37th, New Orleans, LA, April 11-13, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Churches; College Students; Decision Making; Higher Education; *Individual Power; *Marital Satisfaction; Marriage; Role Perception; Self Esteem; Sex Differences; *Spouses
IDENTIFIERS Argumentativeness; *Confusion

ABSTRACT

Many researchers have attempted to assess power in marital dyads. Specifically, the question of which spouse carries the most power has been frequently examined. Confusion between spouses in decision-making roles, number of marital arguments, and self-esteem of spouses were examined in this study. Data were gathered from 31 married couples from churches and 2 college classes. Confusion level and argument information were determined with a take-home survey given to both spouses who were instructed to complete them independently of each other. Confusion level was computed by the differences in spousal responses to questions of marital decision-making. A regression equation was used and a statistically significant positive correlation was found between confusion level and number of marital arguments. Analysis revealed no significant effect for self-esteem of husbands on argument frequency; however, a statistically significant negative correlation was found for argument frequency and self-esteem of wives. A stepwise regression analysis including all variables for husbands and wives combined revealed that confusion level and self-esteem were useful in predicting the frequency of marital arguments. Gender was not found to be a useful predictor. (Author/ABL)

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Confusion in Decision-Making Roles, Argument Level, and Self-Esteem Within Marital Dyads

Nathan Scott Jernigan, MA

Jeannette Heritage, Ph.D.

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Presented at
Southwest Psychological Association
New Orleans, LA
April 1991

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Abstract

Confusion in Decision-Making Roles,
Argument Level, and Self-Esteem
Within Marital Dyads

by Nathan Scott Jernigan

Confusion between spouses in decision-making roles, number of marital arguments, and self-esteem of spouses were examined. The volunteer couples were university students and church members from the Middle Tennessee area. Confusion level and argument information were determined with a take-home survey given to both spouses who were instructed to complete them independent of each other. Confusion level was computed by the differences in spousal responses to questions of marital decision-making. A regression equation was used, and a statistically significant positive correlation was found between confusion level and number of marital arguments. A regression equation yielded no significant effect for self-esteem of husbands on argument frequency; however, a statistically significant negative correlation was found for argument frequency and self-esteem of wives. A stepwise regression analysis including all variables for husbands and wives combined revealed that confusion level and self-esteem were useful in predicting the frequency of marital arguments. Gender was not found to be a useful predictor.

Introduction

Many researchers have attempted to assess power in marital dyads. Specifically, which spouse carries the most power has been frequently examined. Most often researchers have used surveys of marital decision-making in their determinations of marital power (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Buric & Zecevic, 1967; Fox, 1973; Kandel & Lesser, 1972; Michel, 1967; Richmond, 1976; Safilios-Rothschild, 1967, 1969; Szinovacz, 1978).

Of these studies, where the responses of both spouses were used, the majority have been found to have an incongruence between husband and wife responses to questions of marital decision-making. For most researchers this between-spouse disagreement rate has been around 50%, with a range of 23 to 79%. This has been considered a major drawback to studies of marital power (Douglas & Wind, 1978; Granbois & Willett, 1970; Heer, 1962; MacDonald, 1980; Monroe, Bokemeier, Kotchen, & McKean, 1985; Quarm, 1981; Safilios-Rothschild, 1969, 1970; Turk & Bell, 1972; Wilkening & Morrison, 1963).

The present study will utilize methods very similar to those used in previous studies, but for a very different purpose. The primary purpose of this study is not to assess marital power. Instead, it is to examine the effect of disagreement between spouses in decision-making roles on argument frequency. Therefore, the level of disparity

between husbands' and wives' responses to questions of marital decision-making will not be a drawback, but the focus of this study.

Hypothesis. Confusion in marital decision-making roles within dyads will correlate positively with the frequency and severity of the couples' marital arguments.

The relationships among confusion level, self-esteem, and marital arguments of husbands and wives will also be examined.

Method

Subjects

Volunteer subjects were married couples from the Middle Tennessee area. The volunteers (or at least one spouse from each couple) were from two churches, psychology classes at Middle Tennessee State University, and a graduate level statistics class at Tennessee State University. Fifty-six couples volunteered to participate in the research and were given take-home surveys (two per couple). These were in self-addressed, stamped envelopes and were to be mailed back to the examiner upon completion. Surveys from 34 of the couples were received. Three had been filled out incompletely or incorrectly to the extent that they could not be interpreted and were discarded. Data from 31 couples were used in the analysis. Of the 62 individual respondents, 8 were under 30, 12 were from 30 to 39, 14 were

from 40 to 49, 20 were from 50 to 59, and 8 were 60 or older.

Materials

Data were collected from a take-home survey completed by both husbands and wives. The survey consisted of an instructions/informed consent page and a 66-item questionnaire.

Items 1-10 on the questionnaire assessed marital decision-making. Items 11-15 assessed the frequency and severity of arguments. Items 16-39 were included for potentially categorizing subjects among different variables. The first 38 items, though based on previous research, were original to this author. The final 27 items were an administration of the Self-Esteem Scale (Good & Good, 1975).

The answer options to these questions were presented in a long box containing 15 cells. Respondents were instructed to put an "X" in the cell which best describes the couple's mode of decision-making for the particular question. The cell on the extreme left specified "wife," the cell on the extreme right specified "husband," while the center cell indicated "both."

Procedure

Volunteers were given the take-home survey (two per couple) and asked to answer the questions individually and without each other's input.

The amount of disparity between spousal responses (confusion level) was derived from the decision-making questions. For each question, the number of cells separating husband and wife answers was tallied. The sum of the differences for the decision-making questions was the confusion level for each couple.

The number and severity of arguments was assessed in Items 11-15. Each item asked for the number of arguments that the couple has in one month (0 to 13 or more). Each item addressed a different level of severity ("severe," "fairly severe," "average," "fairly mild," and "mild"), and each level was behaviorally defined. When spouses gave different answers on a particular item, the answers were averaged to arrive at the number of arguments (argument level).

Results

Means and standard deviations of confusion level, argument level, and self-esteem are presented in Table 1. Correlation matrices of confusion level, argument level, and self-esteem for husbands and wives are presented in Table 2. Although reliability analyses for the Self-Esteem Scale reveal that the deletion of certain items would improve the total alpha levels (husbands = .6207, wives = .7966), the differences reported would be marginally quite small. Even if all such items were deleted, the differences would be negligibly slight.

Table 1

Means ($\bar{X}$) and Standard Deviations (SD) of Confusion Level, Number of Arguments, and Self-Esteem

		$\bar{X}$	SD
Confusion level		21.23	10.23
Number of arguments	Husbands	6.84	5.67
	Wives	8.87	7.74
	Combined	7.74	5.66
Self-Esteem	Husbands	18.90	3.47
	Wives	15.13	5.03

Table 2

Correlation Matrices of Confusion Level (CL), Argument Level (AL), and Self-Esteem (SE) for Husbands and Wives

Husbands			Wives		
	CL	AL		CL	AL
AL	.601**		AL	.601**	
SE	-.259	-.168	SE	-.110	-.369*

Note. *p = .02. **p = .0004. Self-Esteem is the only variable computed separately for husbands and wives.

A regression analysis was conducted on confusion level (CL) and argument level (AL). For this and all subsequent equations, standard error will be abbreviated S. A statistically significant positive correlation ($r = .601$, $S = 4.602$) was found, $F(1, 29) = 16.37$, $p = .004$. The regression equation is $AL = .332325(CL) + .688077$. This supports the hypothesis. This indicates that as confusion level increases so does the number of arguments.

Regression analyses were conducted on confusion level of couples (CL) and self-esteem (SE) of husbands and wives separately. No statistically significant relationships were found. For husbands, the correlation was $r = -.259$, $S = 10.028$, $F(1, 29) = 2.217$, $p = .080$. For wives, the correlation was $r = -.1095$, $S = 10.342$, $F(1, 29) = .352$, $p = .279$. This indicates that knowing the self-esteem of either spouse will not give a clear indication of confusion level.

Regression analyses were also conducted on argument level of couples (AL) and self-esteem (SE) of husbands and wives separately. No statistically significant relationship was found for husbands. The correlation was $r = -.168$, $S = 56.645$, $F(1, 29) = .948$, $p = .183$. A statistically significant relationship was found for wives. The correlation was $r = -.369$, $S = 53.497$, $F(1, 29) = 4.58$, $p = .020$. The regression equation is $AL = -4.158079(SE) + 140.327059$. This indicates that as self-esteem of wives decreases, argument level increases.

A stepwise regression analysis was done including all variables to determine which variables were the best predictors of argument level. The predictor variables in the equation were confusion level, self-esteem, and gender. For this analysis, arguments were entered separately for husbands and wives based on their individually reported number of arguments (in the previous analyses, argument reports from both spouses were averaged to determine the argument level for each couple). This change was made in order to achieve gender effects. The stepwise regression analysis found that confusion level (CL) and self-esteem (SE) were statistically significant predictors of argument level (AL); gender was not. The correlation was $r = .559$, $S = 5.737$, $F(2, 59) = 13.426$, $p = .0001$. The regression equation is AL = .298342(CL) + (-.395161, SE) + 8.335631. This indicates that if confusion level and self-esteem are known, they can be used to predict argument level.

Regression analysis was also used to investigate the main effects of the predictor variables and their interactions. The main effect of confusion level was statistically significant: $r = .487$, $S = 5.995$, $F(1, 60) = 18.624$, $p = .0001$. The main effect of self-esteem was also statistically significant: $r = .346$, $S = 6.44$, $F(1, 60) = 8.142$, $p = .006$. The main effect of gender was not statistically significant: $r = .183$, $S = 6.746$, $F(1, 60) = 2.086$, $p = .154$. This again

confirms that confusion level and self-esteem are useful in predicting argument level. Gender, however, is not.

None of the interaction effects were statistically significant. This indicates that the effect of any one of the variables does not depend on the effect of any of the others in its relationship to argument level.

An interesting relationship to argument level was found to exist for a particular survey question. The question assessed marital happiness, and answer options were coded 1 (very unhappy) through 5 (very happy). Statistically significant negative correlations were found between argument level and reported marital happiness for both husbands and wives. For husbands, the correlation was $r = -.3571$, $p = .024$. For wives, the correlation was $r = -.5072$, $p = .002$. This indicates that the more arguments couples have the less happy both spouses are with the marriage. Though this is certainly not a surprising finding, it verifies the negative effect higher numbers of arguments have on marital relationships. Therefore, these findings support the choice of argument level as a variable depicting negativeness in marriage for use in the study of confusion in decision-making roles.

Discussion

The hypothesis in this study was supported by the data. A clear relationship was found to exist between the degree of difference in spousal responses to questions of marital

decision-making and the number of reported arguments within marital dyads,. i.e., the greater the confusion in decision-making roles, the more marital arguments there were and vice versa. Basically, the findings suggest that couples who have no clear communicated understanding of who is in charge of making what decisions, or how much weight each spouse's vote carries in joint decisions, argue more than couples who have a clear understanding of their decision-making roles.

Other analyses revealed a significant relationship between self-esteem of wives and number of reported marital arguments. The data indicated that the lower the self-esteem level of wives, the more marital arguments there were and vice versa. This is not surprising given the rationale of the Self-Esteem Scale which was employed in this study. It is based on the assumption that low self-esteem is indicated when someone feels "inferior, inadequate, unworthy, disliked, helpless, etc." (Good & Good, 1975). Feelings such as these seem to naturally lend themselves to argumentative circumstances.

The findings of this study are significant because of the ease with which confusion level can be manipulated. When a couple seeks counseling because of martial arguing, there is no immediate formula for reducing arguments. However, since this relationship between confusion in decision-making roles and argument level has been found to exist, one step worth exploring may be to assess their

confusion level and help the couple to negotiate definite decision-making roles. Perhaps lowering confusion level (which could be accomplished with relative ease) would eventuate into a decrease in marital arguments. These findings also suggest that the establishment of clear decision-making roles would be advantageous in the prevention of arguments in a pre-marital or marriage enrichment counseling situation.

Supporting the use of reported marital arguments as a variable compared with confusion level in this study was the relationship found between argument level and marital happiness. Both husbands' and wives' reports of their marital happiness correlated negatively with argument level for the couples. This validates the accuracy in the use of argument level as a variable depicting negativeness in marriage. To generalize, this also indicates the negativeness of a high level of confusion in marital decision-making roles.

A clear result of this study is that more research is needed. It is hoped that the findings of this study will inspire further research into this often noted, often measured (inadvertently), but largely uninvestigated phenomenon.

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